"WHERE DOES GOD FIT IN?
Genesis 28:10-17
John 14:23-29

MAY 19, 1974

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One time while he was on a lecture tour in London the rumor began to spread that Mark Twain was dead. Always dry and witty, Twain began one evening by dashed off telegram to A.P. who'd - acknowledging the rumor with the comment; "contrary to what you may have heard, the initial reports of my death are ~~somewhat~~ greatly exaggerated."

Eight years ago the rumor was in the air that God was dead. Under the banner, 'The Death of God" a small group of influential theologians wrote books, delivered lectures and handed releases to the press announcing their conclusion that God had, in fact died. It was my experience at the time, since confirmed on many occassions, that very few people understood what the theologians were saying. It offended the piety and sense of propriety. of a lot of people, as might be expected. Time magazine, the week before Easter in 1966, carried it on the cover and all over the land preachers mounted their pulpits to do rhetorical battle with these modern day Assynains. Billy Graham limited his contribution to the then public uproar by saying God couldn't be dead because he had just talked to him that morning. And while it is on that final personal note that the issue must be resolved, the glibleness of the comment showed that much of America was simply unequipped to deal with some rather heavy issues that the theologians were raising. In the meantime they got very rich. Book sales rocketed, lecture fees followed suit. And although none of them has been heard from much in the past five years or so it is an amusing irony that they succeeded to contemplate them now enjoying the a-fluence that resulted from telling 92% of the American people that they were all wet.

In any case, the initial reports of God's death, like Mark Twain's were somewhat exaggerated. God is not dead: not quite at least - and not yet. But the men who first said it had a point I believe.

It might be helpful to understand very quickly what the theologians were saying.

Some were saying that ther e never was a God: that humanity has a need

for a celestial father figure which accounts for this disturbing proponderance of religion in man's history. but that now is the time to grow up emotionally cut the chord and acknowledge that we are an accident, living on board an accident, coming from no where and going nowhere.

Some were saying that God used to exist: that he came among men in Jesus of Nazareth: that when that man died God died - in an ultimate act of self-giving, and what was born afterward was a spirit of love and hope.

Some others were saying, however, that God was very much alive, but that the classic idea of God was dead. These men had a point. God may not have changed,but man has. And in the secular world of the 20th century the question that must be asked is "Where does God fit in?"

That, in my estimation, is the question, to which theologians, the whole church and individual christians need to address themselves. For whether God is or is not; whether God is alive or dead, is a moot point if it doesn't matter either way. Atheism comes in several disguises: classic, philosophic atheism that counts up the ledger and concludes that there is no God: and pragmatic, practical atheism that continues to give verbal assent to the existence of God but then proceeds to live life if it were a XXXX.lie.

Where does God fit in? What difference does it make in the long run? It is a question that thoughtful men have been posing since the beginning of time. If only God would be a little more overt and conspecious! If only God would show his hand in a way that no one would miss or misunderstand. That's not a particularly modern problem. In fact, the prophet Isaiah complained -"Truly, thou are a God who hidest thyself".

And yet the prob lm comes at us today with a new urgency and a new immediacy. The Jewish Philosopher, Martin Buber, coined the phrase the "eclipse or God", and suggested that God is very bit as present as he has been, but that the very natufe of modern life serves to put a shade betwween God and man. But probably the major factor about the way the issues comes at us today is that we - in our time - have lived through the kind of

experiences that seem, inherently, to say that it is foolish to go on believing in God.

Richard Rubenstein, a Rabbi, in his book, After Auschwitz, tells how he found that he had to discard any vestigaes of faith in a personal and all-powerful God after World War II. Auschwitz did it. There can be no God - for the world in which that happened. Atrocities always stir up the question: consider what happened to twenty school children in an Israeli village last week. Look at the pictures of babies before they died of starvation - and it is impossible to rely on thoughtless piety. Where does God fit in?"

The Christian Faith has always said two things about God - two separate things that need to be underscored and then kept in a kind of tight tension. Please excuse the introduction of theological jargon but the words are good and they need to be used on occassion. We believe that God is transcendent and immanent.

We believe, first, that God is holy -other - different, above and beyond what we are. Because we are men and he is God our best thoughts are still human thoughts and will never contain an adequate understanding of his being. We can pile superlatives on top of superlatives - and we still have a list of human ideas. So we are left with a mystery - and unfathonable mystery that reduces us to fear and awe.

We believe, second, that God is with us: that he not only chose to reveal himself in the life of Jesus Christ, but that he is very much involved in human history -and personal history. He is immediate, at home in his world, available to his people as friend,comforter, father, judge, stimulater, motivator.

These are the two ideas which must be kept prominently in tension: transcendence and immanance. God the Almighty Creator - God the loving father. I am a Presbyterian, in part I suppose because our tradition has consistantly done this. For the fact of the matter is that a lot of religion leans heavily ~~in~~ in one direction or the other and is the poorer for it.

The tendency to emphasize the mystery and transcendance of God at the

expense of his closeness has always been with us. The great and grand cathedrals of the middle ages express this side of the tension eloquently. So do beautiful liturgies, heroic music. They tend to make a man feel small, humble, aware of the great gap between God and himself. Trouble is they have a way of shutting out the other idea altogether - the idea that God is near and personal.

The opposite temptation is to emphasize the nearness and immediacy of God that any thought of his majesty and grandeur is lost. That is the mistake of the "Jesus movement" and the more exuberant sects that talk about God as if he were just one of theboys. Last summer I met with people whose sense of God's nearness was so acute thatthey were consulting JESUS ABOUT WHAT clothes to put on to go to Church - and getting answers apparently.

When the tension between transcendence and immanance; between majesty and nearness is broken the result is a poor faith, and a God who does not resemble the God of the Bible. That is why, for instance, the Presbyterian tradition insists on orderliness in worship - not because we're stodgy or unemotional or afraid to loosen up. But because worship intends to put us in touch with a God who is holy and almighty and majestic. Worship ought to lift us up - to inspire us: the music and words and acts we do in worship - ought never to be done casually and without the greatest care.

The other side of it, of course, is that orderliness ought never to ellimate personal intimacy. There must always be room for creativity and spontaneity. We need sometimes to force the issue - to structure expressions such as our special early services that build up the opportunity to affirm a God who is hear as well as far. We need to stay with our custom of shaking each other's hand in communion and addressing each other personally as we share the elements.

We're strayed a bit - but for a reason. Because I believe God is dying for you if you cannot keep that tension. We need both experiences.

The Christian Church has a formula with which it describes God. The

Trinity - God in three persons. The trouble with that doctrine is that it no longer says what it intends to say. Persons, for instance, doesn't really mean persons at all. It comes from the Latin *persona* which means personalities - and before that from a world that originally meant "mask" - the kind of masks actors wore to identify what role they were playing. When we invoke the phrase - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - we do not mean three Gods - but one God who chose to xxxx reveal himself in three ways: as the Father, creator, and the man JESUS, AND AS THE PRESENCE WHICH CONTINUES TO TOUCH the life of man.

A professor of mine, Joseph Haroutunian, used to say that to understand Christian doctrine you must first understand the ideas - against which the doctrine was first formulated. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity was devised and is retained precisely to keep alive that tension I've been describing. It intends to say that God is up there - in the vastness of the universe, but that is was also back there in the life of that particular man, and that he is here, now in our world and in our life.

But where? Where does God fit in? Granted the necessities of all the theological vicities we've been thinking about where can we see him and know him and experience him. Our Old Testamanet Lesson provides a cue. Jacob, you will recall was on his way from Beirsheba to Haran. Night comes and he camps along the road. There xxx is nothing special about the place. During the night he has a dream about a ladder and angels ascending and descending. The next morning Jacob makes two statements, both of which are true: "Surely the Lord is xx in this place", as indeed he was: "I did not know it," as indeed he did not.

That is tosay, the existence or presence of God did not depend on Jacob's ability to perceive. And more importantly God was present for Jacob in a rather unlikely set of circumstances. (See R.M. Brown, The Pseudonymus of God , P.73-74)

So, it seems to me, God fits in at times and places when we are not

particularly looking for him. In his book "How to Believe Again"- Helmut Thielicke tells a story of a catholic priest in the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. As it's interesting that he should choose the same circumstances which for Rabbi Rubenstein mark the death of God. In any case, when the whistle blew to awaken the prisoners every morning the priest would jump to his feet and sing the Gloria PATRI in a voice loud enough to be heard all over the camp- despite being beaten and tortured because of it."

Thielicke suggests that we who have been insulated from that kind of thing ought to take very seriously the testimony from extremity.

Later on the same essay Thielicke cites a book published by a Czechoslovokian Communist entitled "God is Not Quite Dead", a man who regards himself as a confirmed atheist - and yet one who is continually badgered by the idea of God. And again Thielicke advises that the thoughtful person will take very seriously the testimony of men who have tried XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX and been unable to shape the idea of God.

I believe God may be seen in the history that is being lived in our day. I think the hand of God - the God who is eternally for all his people was at work in the Civil Rights movement - even though we were not always able to see, and many die dnot expect it, particularly there.

I think the presence of God was affirmed in our common life in moral outrage in the last days of the Viet Nam war - even though that presence was not always affirmed in the Churches.

And I dare to think that God's presence in our midst if affirmed today in the slow but sure demand for integrity on the part of our president and his administration.

More personally, I believe God connects with your life and mine when healing happens, when somehow love overcomes apathy and someone helps another person. I believe God is alive and present when his people give sacrifically, without counting the cost and without expecting credit.

I believe God disturbs our consciences. I believe God makes us restless with monotony: I believe God prods us to think and doubt and

discover. I see God in the classroom, the lab oratory. I see him in the faces of impatient young people: I see him in the lives of committed men and women: I see him iy the bed side of the elderly and the ill.

Where Does God Fit In?

He already is here. Majestic in his holiness,yet as close and intimate as your dearest friend.

May we see him - may we affirm him - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - God with us. AMEN

FATHER, Help us to see you at work in your world. Grant us grace to know and experience your presence in our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN